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Wellbeing and personality through sports: A qualitative study of older badminton players in two cultures

The study explores older adults’ lived experiences and meaning making around sports participation, wellbeing, and personality in later life. Semi-structured interviews with six badminton players (three British, three Hong Kong Chinese; age range 56 to 75) were conducted, and the transcripts analysed according to the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The interviews with the Hong Kong participants were conducted bilingually enabling code-switching between Cantonese and English. Three overarching themes were derived: 1) British and Hong Kong players saw badminton as a conduit for self expression and mood regulation; 2) the British players claimed badminton helped them develop as a person; and 3) the Hong Kong players claimed that badminton was a mirror of their culture. The findings disclose, in addition to physical health, sports participation supports wellbeing and continuing personal development in later life through being a crucible for change. We discuss implications for understanding sports through the phenomenological lens, to illuminate the lifeworld generally, and societal processes beyond.

Keywords: ageing; British; health psychology; Hong Kong; phenomenology

Introduction

Global population demographics are rapidly transforming. Owing to improved health services and declining fertility rates, a rapidly increasing older age section of the world population are living much longer and looking to enjoy life well into old age (Geard et al. 2017). As of February 5, 2018, the World Health Organisation listed on its website that between 2015 to 2050, the proportion of the world's population aged 60 years and older is expected to rise from 12% to 22%. Psychology and related fields are, as a result, increasingly addressing the factors which promote healthy and successful ageing (Cosco and Kuh 2016). Personality and wellbeing, owing to their established contributions to successful ageing, are significant topics in psychological research on older adults (Chiao and Hsiao 2017; Diener and Chan 2011; Klaming, Veltman, and Comijs 2017). Quantitative research commonly addresses causal links between physical activity and aspects of personality or wellbeing (Allen et al. 2017; Potocnik and Sonnentag 2013; Stephan, Sutin, and Terracciano 2014; Taylor et al. 2004; Whitehead and Blaxton 2017), often conceptualised artificially as separate constructs. Qualitative research to disclose the often intricate and subtle interplay between physical activity, feeling well, and personality in older adults' individual lived experience, may help to mitigate this limitation. Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued that the phenomena of consciousness are equiprimordial rather than causal. He argued for a conceptualisation of interpermeating parts within a systemic whole, rather than linear, causal mechanisms (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The present study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) to explore the personal lifeworlds of older badminton players, focusing on how they make sense of the interpermeation of sports participation, personality expression and their experienced wellbeing. IPA is a qualitative methodology frequently used in health

psychology, which incorporates understandings from both researcher and participant, acknowledging the co-creation of psychological knowledge (Smith et al. 2009). There is currently no published IPA study of how older badminton players experience themselves and their wellbeing through their sport.

Existential phenomenology, the stance adopted in this study, rejects the Cartesian division of objective world ‘out there’ distinct from consciousness within the body (Moran, 2000). Rather, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) put it, the world is already interpreted, and world, body, and consciousness are intertwined, inter-relating and inextricable from each other. From this standpoint, phenomena are not abstract information, but are a part of incarnate subjectivity (Allen-Collinson 2009). Merleau-Ponty’s (1963) concept of existential unity posited the body and world as forming a system, which he called the *flesh* of the world. His concept of *chiasm* expressed the crossover of the body–world, such that experiencing my body is experiencing the world, and vice versa. He asserted a deeply corporeal, pre-reflective experiencing, where our mode of being is fundamentally a manner of treating a specific world made only available by the kind of body that we are. Merleau-Ponty’s (1969) concept of *intercorporeality* further demonstrated that our experience of embodiment is always already mediated by interactions with other bodies. This inter-embodiment recasts our understanding of the sporting body as inseparable from intersubjectivity and mood, two other ontological dimensions of Heidegger’s (1962) Dasein. The analysis recasts the *being-in-the-world* as *flesh-of-the-world*, which conveys, alongside the body’s fundamental embeddedness within a world, their interpermeation.

Previous qualitative research has addressed older adults’ lived experiences of their bodies through sports and exercise. A content analytic study of 27 active older adults in the United Kingdom (UK) by Phoenix and Orr (2014), identified four

cardinal types of pleasure from physical exercise: *sensual pleasure* (e.g., feeling the wind on the body); *documented pleasure* (e.g., written accounts recalling experiences); *pleasure of habitual action* (e.g., going ahead despite bad weather); and *pleasure of immersion* (e.g., losing oneself in Tai Chi sequences). Humberstone and Stuart's (2016) phenomenological study of older women from two exercise classes in England drew on this typology of pleasure. They reported the *auditory* and *kinaesthetic* senses as especially important (e.g., pleasure through moving to the rhythm of the music). Heo et al. (2013) used a constant comparison qualitative method to analyse in-depth interviews with 10 older participants of the United States (US) Senior Games. Of particular note are their themes *perseverance* and *unique ethos*: the former symbolise continuing despite fatigue and injury; the latter reflected the older athletes' inclusion within a special social world defined by distinctive ideals, values, sentiments, and guiding beliefs. The authors' concluded that sport – understood as *serious leisure* – provided the older adults with an athletic identity, which could sustain wellbeing and a healthy lifestyle (Heo et al. 2013). A study by Dionigi, Horton and Baker (2013) addressed ways that sport helps negotiate the ageing process. Their narrative methodology analysed personal stories from 44 older sports participants from four western nations in the World Masters Games. Four themes reflected participants' stories of: avoiding old age; *fighting the ageing process*; *redefining self and 'old age'*; and *adaptation and acceptance*. These stories enhanced participants' wellbeing by providing alternatives to the dominant 'declining body' narrative of ageing (Dionigi et al. 2013). Despite the well documented benefits of sports and exercise for older adults, two issues are noteworthy: 1) many older people still consider physical activity unnecessary and risky (Franco et al. 2015), and 2) most studies to date have been based on English-speaking nations of West. The later issue is reflected by two recent

systematic reviews. Gayman et al.’s (2017) review of ten studies of the psychosocial outcomes of sports participation, included no studies of Eastern societies. In Franco et al.’s (2015) review of qualitative research on older adults’ perspectives on physical activity, 70% of the 132 studies included were based in the US, UK, or Canada. Hence, the experiences and perspectives of non-Western older participants are under-represented.

This study forms part of a larger multi-method research project to explore interrelationships between leisure-time physical activity, personality, and wellbeing in Hong Kong (HK) and the UK. HK, a British colony for over 150 years, was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. The historical tie has shaped the psychology of HK people, and they have been described as genuinely bicultural (Chan and Lee 1995). In addition to west-facing values (e.g., The Umbrella Movement, see Hall 2017), many older adults in HK continue to sustain traditional Chinese values through ancient arts such as T’ai Chi (Yau and Packer 2002), which is a cultural export to the West (Campbell 2015). Therefore, HK’s Chinese cultural value-base and longstanding association with the UK provides an interesting psychological counterpoint. Older, native inhabitants of HK have lived through both British (pre-1997) and Chinese (post-1997) systems. Their experiences of sports may be able to offer meaningful insights that may be culturally interpreted.

This paper reports results of an IPA study of the interpermeation of wellbeing, personality and sport, using a sample of older badminton players drawn from both HK and the UK. Badminton was selected because of its high level of popularity. As of November 23, 2018, the BBC Sport Academy listed badminton as the second most popular participation sport in the world. A culturally varied sample was employed to enhance opportunities for interpretation. We employed Todres and Galvin’s (2010)

1
2
3 existential-phenomenological theory of wellbeing as an initial interrogative
4
5 framework. This theory was recently used to enquire into the wellbeing of older
6
7 adults' as they moved into extra care housing (Shaw et al. 2016). The theory
8
9 conceptualises wellbeing in its deepest possibility as a dialectic between *dwelling*
10
11 (rootedness) and *mobility* (flow), as manifest in the six dimensions of the lifeworld:
12
13 spatiality, temporality, intersubjectivity, mood, identity, and embodiment (Todres and
14
15 Galvin 2010). These are based on Heidegger's concept of *Gegnet* (abiding expanse) in
16
17 his later works on existential homelessness – the uniquely human situation that
18
19 energises us towards greater authenticity (Mugerauer 2008; Todres and Galvin 2010;).
20
21 Through this approach, we aim to understand our participants as people actively
22
23 making sense of their situations, and trying to find their own unique ways towards
24
25 healthy ageing.
26
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32

33 **Methodology**

34 *Sample*

35
36 According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA studies typically use small samples to focus on
37
38 the quality of the lifeworld in depth and detail. Smith et al. (2009) suggested that a
39
40 sample size between three to six participants is suitable for IPA's idiographic approach
41
42 of disclosing participants' lived experiences and making sense of essential phenomena
43
44 from a relatively homogeneous group.
45
46
47
48

49 Participants were recruited through personal networks and snowball sampling.
50
51 The inclusion criteria were: 1) aged 50 years or above, 2) British living in the UK or
52
53 Hongkonger living in HK, 3) member of a badminton club who plays the sport at least
54
55 once a week, and 4) able to read English and speak fluently in either Cantonese or
56
57 English. Altogether six participants (age range 56 to 75 years) participated in this
58
59
60

study. Three of them were from the UK, and the other three were from HK. Table 1 provides their demographic information. The average length of the interviews was 55 minutes.

[Insert Table 1]

Procedure

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared. After receiving ethical approval from XXX, a pilot interview was conducted to fine tune the schedule and interview questions. Prior to the interviews, participants were given an information sheet and they all signed a consent form. In the interviews, they were first asked a series of background questions.

Funnelling was used beginning with relatively straightforward questions (e.g., What makes you like badminton?). Participants were then asked about the role of badminton in their wellbeing (e.g., What do you gain from your participation in badminton?), followed by questions about their personality on and off the badminton court (e.g., How does your personality shine through?). Finally, they were asked about possible influences of culture on their experience. Probes such as “Can you elaborate on that?” were used when a response was unclear.

All interviews were transcribed within 72 hours after completion. Although the HK participants were proficient in English, they were given a choice to do the interviews in either Cantonese or English. This was so they could express themselves in their mother tongue, especially when discussing HK’s local culture. All of the HK participants all opted for Cantonese, although often code-switched between Cantonese and English during their interviews. To ensure that they were not misinterpreted, an English transcript of the interview was sent to each participant. They were invited to

correct for originally intended meanings in the translation. No participants opted to correct their translated transcripts.

Data analysis

IPA was used to analyse the interviews. This qualitative approach is phenomenological in that it explores in detail how individuals give meaning to their personal experiences (Smith 1996). It also emphasises the researcher's active role in making sense of the participants' personal and social world through a process of interpretative activity based on his or her own personal experiences and understanding of the relevant literature (Smith 1996).

Analysis was conducted based on guidelines from Smith et al. (2009) and a published cross-cultural study using IPA (Tan et al. 2010). First, the transcripts were read and re-read to gain a rich familiarity with the participant's meanings. Second, intra-case themes were identified and theme labels were developed. Within this stage, each of the transcripts was analysed individually using the empathic hermeneutic (Ricoeur, 1974). Dialogues between the two authors enhanced development of emergent themes. Third, inter-case themes were identified. This included looking for connections between the intra-case emergent themes from each of the participants and grouping them according to conceptual similarities. At this stage, some of the themes that had weaker evidential bases, or did not fit well with the emerging structure were dropped. Fourth, the remaining themes were finally reconfigured. They are presented in Table 2 and Table 3 (in Appendix) for the UK and the HK participants respectively. Themes across the two groups were noted, and their commonalities and differences were identified.

Credibility checks

A number of strategies were adopted to enhance the credibility of the analyses. First, open coding was used to ensure that our analysis was organised around themes that emerged from the transcripts, instead of pre-determined constructs (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Second, we followed Smith and McGannon’s (2018) recommendation of using critical friends to assess the quality of the data presented. The second author acted as a critical friend to review whether the themes captured participants lived experiences, and how the selected extracts might be interpreted differently. Third, researcher reflexivity was systematically employed. In particular, we drew on Ahern’s (1999) guidelines for reflexive bracketing. For example, the first author kept a reflexive journal to continuously language how his own bicultural background (Chinese enculturation through growing up in HK, British acculturation through a first degree in the UK), and taken-for-granted assumptions (e.g. understandings of wellbeing informed by both Western and Eastern cultures), could influence the research process. The possible impact of these was monitored through in-depth analytic discussions with the second author. Some reflections and their impact are discussed later in the Conclusion.

Results and discussion

The findings are presented in three sections. The first section focuses on the similarities between British and HK participants. The second and third sections present more unique themes from the British and the HK participants respectively.

Shared themes: Badminton as i) Self expression and ii) Mood regulation

i) Self expression

1
2
3 British and HK older adults experienced badminton as a platform to express
4 themselves. Darren begins by explaining how he expresses himself through a recent
5 attempt to play with someone much younger than him:
6
7
8

9
10 “I’ll say, I’m open to experiences [...] If I see players in their 20s or 30s, I
11 tend to avoid them (laughs). Having said that, I recently played with a Hong
12 Kong team member last week. Why? Because he needed an extra player to
13 be his partner. He was like, ‘Hey, come and have a go!’ So, when I played
14 with him, it’s a different game. I tried to avoid playing at the back, I stayed
15 up front so I could run less, that Hong Kong team guy stayed at the back and
16 played like a beast, you could literally hear the sound of him smashing the
17 shuttlecock tirelessly, and there was no chance I could play like him, so what
18 I could only do was to focus on my own part - staying up front, trying to play
19 a few shots there and taking those chances.” – Darren
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21
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31 Darren’s sense of self is expressed in two notable ways. First, despite his
32 tendency to avoid younger players, he is up for the challenge of filling in when
33 younger players need him for a game. Second, he is also open to using different tactics
34 to cooperate with his younger partner. Stories of acceptance and adaptation in Dionigi
35 et al.’s (2013) study showed that sports offered older participants an alternative to the
36 declining body narrative of ageing. Similar to Dionigi et al.’s (2013) participants,
37 Darren’s experiences highlight the role of badminton in helping him to accept and
38 adapt to his ageing body - he appreciates that his body no longer allows him to play
39 “tirelessly” like his younger partner, so he adopts a tactical position in which he is
40 positioned to “take those chances”. Adopting Todres and Galvin’s (2010) concept of
41 dwelling-mobility, Darren may be said to experience dwelling in the dimension of
42 embodiment – a quality of rootedness, through acceptance of his body’s limitations.
43 His tactical adaptations during the game, on the other hand, may offer mobility, an
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1
2
3 experience of flow in playing “up front” and seeking after chances. Dwelling-mobility
4
5 experienced together offers wellbeing in its deepest possibility according to
6
7 Heidegger: adventure from existential possibility as well as at-homeness with what has
8
9 been given (Todres and Galvin 2010).
10

11 David recalls how badminton allows his “competitive” self:
12

13
14 “[Badminton] gives me everything that I want. I want challenge, and I’ve
15
16 always been competitive [...] If you want to succeed in any sports, you’ve
17
18 got to be competitive, I believe. Without the competitiveness, you haven’t
19
20 got the challenge that it brings, and the, um, the drive to get better, and drive
21
22 to improve yourself, um, which is all part of it.” – David
23
24

25 David “wants challenge” and playing sports and being competitiveness are
26
27 entwined together in his life. Badminton “gives him everything” and, in particular,
28
29 expression to his need for competitiveness. These drive him to “challenge” and
30
31 “improve” himself. References to identity, being retired, and a widower recur through
32
33 his interview. Applying Todres and Galvin’s (2010) theory, competitiveness in
34
35 badminton may offer David mobility in the identity and embodiment elements of his
36
37 lifeworld. In terms of the identity element, he experiences a sense of *I can* (seeking to
38
39 win). In the embodiment element, he gets a sense of *vitality*, of “getting better” and a
40
41 “drive to improve”.
42
43
44

45 Finally, Gloria is able to express her interest in new people in the context of
46
47 badminton:
48
49

50
51 “[A] good thing about the club is that during every badminton session,
52
53 there will always be a few spaces open to the public, so almost every time
54
55 you get to play with or against someone new, and I’m usually quite
56
57 excited about that part.” – Gloria
58
59
60

1
2
3 The prospect of playing with strangers is “quite exciting” for Gloria. This
4 offers mobility in various elements in her lifeworld. In terms of temporality, she is
5 energised by the recurring future possibilities of “someone new”; in terms of
6 intersubjectivity, the uncertainty of what kind of people will fill up the “few spaces
7 open to the public” offers her a sense of *mysterious interpersonal attraction* (Todres
8 and Galvin 2010, 5-6).
9

10
11 The participants’ experiences in badminton illuminate how sport, personality,
12 and wellbeing interpermeate in their lives. For Darren, badminton brings to the fore
13 his openness toward himself and toward others, and appears to be a significant element
14 of his ageing process. For David, there is vitality and a sense of ‘I can’ from
15 embodying competitiveness on court. For Gloria, the desire and recurring opportunity
16 to experience badminton with new members of the public affords wellbeing socially
17 and temporally in the anticipation of the future.
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35 *ii) Mood regulation*

36
37 Badminton was also an opportunity for our participants to experience hopeful mood.

38
39 Darren recounts an experience of reconnection:
40

41
42 “I thought they had already forgotten me. However, I recently crashed
43 into them again in this club, and they showed great respect to me, telling
44 me all about their life, including their university life and work life; and
45 that made me really happy, really happy!” – Darren
46
47
48
49
50

51 Darren thought he was forgotten by the young men he had coached previously,
52 yet they re-connected with him and “showed great respect” to him. Being remembered
53 and still appreciated by these former relationships, and seeing his continuing relevance
54 in their lives, were sources of good mood, as can be seen by “really happy” in the
55 extract which he repeats twice in succession. It is relevant to add that Darren currently
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 plays with a coach and shows a great respect for her (analysed later). Thus the
4
5 coaching relationship is an aspect of badminton that offers a significant source of
6
7 reward and enjoyment for himself through self-improvement and the benefitting of
8
9 others.
10

11
12 By contrast, David claims “pleasure” from [appreciating the aesthetic aspects of](#)
13
14 [sports](#):
15

16
17 “People get so much lift in terms of beauty, seeing people participating in
18
19 sports (pause) and I realise that (pause) I’m one of those, I get an awful lot
20
21 of pleasure from seeing people I’ve seen over the years in cricket, football,
22
23 badminton [...] I’ve seen good badminton players that I just enjoyed
24
25 watching from, might be the way they move, the way they perform their
26
27 shots, that’s what I get out of sports generally. [A fellow club member] has
28
29 certain amounts of beauty in the way he moves about in the court, and the
30
31 way he plays his shots, it’s almost artistic, almost like a bit of a balled
32
33 dance if you like, coming in and playing a shot, and then playing a
34
35 deceptive shot, you know, that’s beauty to me!” – David
36
37

38
39 In David’s life, sports have provided a hedonic element of pleasure through the
40
41 lift in mood, and a eudaimonic element of self-understanding through indications to
42
43 his own identity – helping to situate himself, as when he says “I’m one of those!”. This
44
45 understanding becomes more significant when considered in the context of another
46
47 part of the interview where he highlights not feeling “isolated” as important to his
48
49 wellbeing, especially since becoming a widower. In our analysis, sports provide David
50
51 with wellbeing through the qualities of dwelling (*I am*) and mobility (*I can*) in the
52
53 identity element of his lifeworld. [His aesthetic responses recall Phoenix and Orr’s](#)
54
55 [\(2014\) sensory form of pleasure. Participants from their study and those from](#)
56
57 [Humberstone and Stuart \(2016\) reported sensory pleasure through touch, smell,](#)
58
59
60

1
2
3 hearing, and proprioception. In contrast, the visual form of pleasure is focal in David's
4
5 account of being on court, witness to "beauty, artistry, and dance".
6
7

8 Finally, Paul's good mood is manifest during the day in the anticipation of
9
10 playing:
11

12 "On the days I'm playing badminton, you know, I'm quite excited, quite
13
14 pleased. I wake up in the morning thinking, 'Yes, I'm going to play badminton
15
16 today', but the rest of the days when I don't play badminton, it's not a
17
18 negative effect because I'm not playing badminton, it's just normal." – Paul
19
20

21 Badminton enables Paul to experience his day as "excited" and "pleased" and
22
23 himself in terms of the presence and absence of badminton. When present, he wakes
24
25 up motivated by the thought-feeling of "Yes, I'm going to play badminton today".
26
27 When absent, he does not experience particular "negative effects" as the days are "just
28
29 normal". Paul's relation with badminton highlights an experience of dwelling-mobility
30
31 in his mood, as described by Todres and Galvin (2010). The anticipation of playing in
32
33 the coming day appears as a felt sense of "Yes" propelling him forward. The days
34
35 without badminton lack this mobility, yet they are "not negative, [rather] just normal",
36
37 suggesting a peacefulness in dwelling in his mood during these days.
38
39
40
41

42 Our participants' rich lived experiences help to flesh out the link between
43
44 physical activity and wellbeing reported in previous ageing research (e.g., Whitehead
45
46 and Blaxton 2017) through three notable ways: 1) physical interpersonal activity
47
48 through sport offers older adults a chance for meaningful reconnection, 2) sport offers
49
50 opportunities for aesthetic expression and self-actualisation, and 3) physical
51
52 interpersonal activity stimulates hopeful and open anticipation of the future. Based on
53
54 our analysis, embodied cooperation and interconnectedness with others appears to be
55
56 particularly important in older adults' enjoyment of sports participation.
57
58
59
60

British participants: Badminton as a conduit for self-improvement

British participants illuminated a further beneficial theme from their sport: becoming a better person. All of them stated that badminton helped them to change in a positive way. In the following extract, David acknowledges shortcomings and how he tries to moderate them:

“I’m not a big admirer of myself, in terms of my personality, but I do try to moderate all of my shortcomings, and be more considerate of others [...] My hidden (2 seconds) shortcomings are largely caused by my own dissatisfaction with my own performance, but I do that by showing a bit of aggressiveness on court, and (pause) poor behaviour at times, which I’m not happy about, and I’ve tried to be (pause) temperate many times but not with a lot of success, I need to have some (pause) something that really gets me (pause) going if you like. But it doesn’t excuse my behaviour.” – David

David can see the “shortcomings” of his personality through badminton, and he tries to be more “considerate of others” and “temperate” although without a lot of success. Through the manifestation of poor behaviour and the realisation on court with others, he is able to come to a judgment that his self-dissatisfaction does not excuse his behaviour. Badminton gives him the opportunity to see the disparity between the person he is and the person he would rather be. In Heidegger’s (1962) discussion of authenticity, he placed central importance in Dasein’s hearing (hearkening) the conscience - this “voice” inside is not formulated in words but calls us if we are ready to listen to our ownmost being. For David, incidents in badminton seem to trigger his conscience, which calls him to account: by confronting him with the mismatch between his ways of being in different parts of his lifeworld. Heidegger (1962) believed that hearing one’s conscience was crucial to authenticity by temporalizing

1
2
3 what he is, has been, and resolves to be in future. In another part of his interview,
4
5 David is kind towards his two grandchildren, yet here we see how he is unkind
6
7 towards the other players on court, through being upset with himself. Heidegger's
8
9 (1962) concept of the conscience offers a way to understand David's self-
10
11 improvement.
12
13

14 Paul describes himself as "reserved" and "quiet" in public, but he also claims
15
16 that he can be "very extraverted" in badminton:
17
18

19 "He was playing down there one time when I was playing with other
20
21 people, and I, erm, I just said to him, 'Do you want to have a game?',
22
23 and then we played a game together, and we exchanged emails and got
24
25 in touch to play whenever we could. The same with the other people I
26
27 play with now." – Paul
28
29

30 Paul's badminton makes him extraverted, as he puts it. In order to find other
31
32 players, he is willing to approach strangers to enlist them for his group. According to
33
34 Adler (2013), personality serves people's particular purposes and goals within their
35
36 lifespan. The person is not extraverted, for no reason. Paul's extraversion is not an
37
38 isolated 'trait' of himself occurring in a cultural vacuum. It is valuable for Paul to
39
40 gather people together to play badminton and we can see in the transcript it is also a
41
42 vehicle for other purposes: to diffuse stress and engage with strangers. These purposes
43
44 amount to Paul's extraversion, as a particular way of being-in-the-world (Heidegger
45
46 1962). This lifeworld is one in which others are approachable, yet these others have, as
47
48 he puts it, "come and gone over the years". Phenomenology is a critique of the
49
50 essentialist view of personality, as somehow inside the person as a trait. Ron's
51
52 extraversion is not "inside" him; it is out there in-the-world: the world calls for Paul to
53
54 be socially outward and fulfil this role to sustain badminton within his and others'
55
56 lives. We may say the world of Paul calls for someone's extraversion and this
57
58
59
60

someone happens to be him. Extraversion describes both Paul and the world: the being-in-the-world.

Emma states explicitly “becoming a better person”:

“If you think, oh, I can’t be bothered doing this today, you’re going to let three people down, because there’s four to play, so it makes you motivated and committed, just the fact that you’re not going to let people down [...] You’d probably become a better person through it because you, as I said, you don’t want to let people down.” – Emma

Emma is motivated by not letting other players down. This awareness of others is what encourages commitment even on days when she cannot be bothered. The commitment to not letting others down in badminton is in her understanding making her “a better person”. This converges with the *perseverance* theme presented in Heo et al. (2013), which reported how different challenges in the context of sport helped older adults to develop a sense of perseverance. For Emma, the challenge is that her club will always require four players (including herself) to be present, and this challenge plays an important part in developing her [commitment to enabling others to play](#). [Emma’s sense making recalls Phoenix and Orr \(2014\) that physical activity could contribute to the development of a *disciplined body* in older age.](#)

According to Roberts and Mroczek’s (2008) review of ageing research, personality development continues throughout later life and old age. The analysis of our participants provides lived experiences to exemplify this process: David trying to be more considerate; Paul being more extraverted; and Emma practising commitment. It is noteworthy that in addition to developing a sense of perseverance (as discussed in Heo et al. 2013), other aspects of self-improvement in later life may also be triggered by the process of facing the challenges associated with sport: David’s challenge of reacting to poor performance on the badminton court seems to help develop his self-

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3 awareness; and Paul's challenge of recruiting more players seems to help develop his
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5 extraversion.
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10 ***Hong Kong participants: Badminton is a cultural symbol***

11
12 The HK participants made sense of some of their experiences in terms of their culture
13 and society. Playing badminton reflected some cultural features of HK. First,
14
15 appointing a coach is common among older players in HK. All three of the
16
17 participants spoke proactively about their positive experiences with a coach. Chris
18
19 mentions that his coach helps to "hone his skills". Gloria claims that playing with the
20
21 coach allows her to "learn something new" and to "feel more comfortable". Darren
22
23 seems to get the most from his coach:
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26
27

28 "If I play well, then I will feel very satisfied. I may text my coach
29
30 afterwards and tell her how happy I feel. I will thank my coach for a
31
32 good training session. On the other hand, if I don't play well enough, I
33
34 may text the coach to apologise. Why? Because the coach has spent
35
36 both the time and the effort to help me improve, yet I don't play well
37
38 enough, so I feel like I'm letting the coach down." – Darren
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40

41 The extract displays the following notable experiential claims: 1) he feels
42
43 gratitude towards his coach for playing well; 2) he feels apologetic for not playing
44
45 well; and 3) he feels he is "letting the coach down" when he does not play well. Thus,
46
47 when he plays well, it is due to the coach and the "good training session". However,
48
49 when he does not play well, he is culpable for letting the coach down and wasting her
50
51 time. The asymmetry in this attribution style is reminiscent of the traditional Chinese
52
53 master-disciple relationship. According to this relationship, the role of disciple is to
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55 atone for any failings and to gratefully revere the master for any personal successes
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59
60 (Wach, Kitagawa, and Alles 1988). For Darren, enacting this attributional style with

his coach seems an important part of his enjoyment. It is also noteworthy that the way he expresses his happiness and satisfaction gained from playing good badminton (i.e., via text messages after the session) is a good example to illuminate what Phoenix and Orr (2014) described as documented pleasure.

Chris feels that badminton reflects what he admires about HK's culture:

“Badminton is a special sport, because it is a sport that you see people playing from a very young age to a very old age. I think that's something positive [...] In HK, there's an accommodating culture. People tend to be inviting and encouraging, even if they don't share the same interest as yours. I think this kind of culture can be found in the sporting context here as well [...] It doesn't matter where I come from, what my level of education is, or what I can afford; as long as I have my badminton racket and my trainers, I can play, and all of us who play the sport are equal.” – Chris

Chris claims that HK is “an accommodating culture” and he can feel this inclusivity in badminton. Badminton is “special” because it can accommodate people of different ages, interests, backgrounds, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. This high level of inclusivity in the badminton arena seems to allow Chris to experience dwelling in the spatial element of his lifeworld – a sense of being at-home and feeling of comfort and settlement in his physical environment, qualities associated with dwelling in one's spatiality (Todres and Galvin 2010).

By contrast, badminton could also disclose some of the political problems that Hongkongers are facing. In the context of the current socio-political differences between HK and China, relationships between some native Hongkongers and Chinese from the Mainland are under strain (Chen, Hsu, and Li 2018; Hall 2017; Lowe and Tsang 2017). Gloria's unpleasant experience in her club reflects this tension:

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2
3 “There’re quite a few people from Mainland China in my club. They
4
5 tend to be a bit wild. They tend to get angry as soon as something
6
7 doesn’t go their way. If they don’t like something, they’ll grumble
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9 immediately [...] I feel that their culture was really different. Their
10
11 focus was always on winning. In order to win, they might try to avoid
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13 playing with me, or yell at me.” – Gloria
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15

16 The extract captures Gloria’s understanding of the situation between HK and
17
18 China. She says the Mainlanders in her club “tend to be a bit wild”. They have bad
19
20 tempers and are obsessed with winning. It is relevant to draw from two other parts of
21
22 her interview for further interpretation. First, Gloria mentions that she tends to focus
23
24 on the “process” of playing badminton more than the “winning”. Hence, the process-
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26 orientation versus goal-directedness is perhaps how she understands her experience of
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28 badminton as “really different” from that of the Mainlanders in her club. Second,
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30 Gloria describes herself as “emotionally stable”. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962),
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32 our sense of self derives from involvement in an intersubjective world. For example,
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34 we may gain a sense of self through interpersonal comparisons (Merleau-Ponty 1962).
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36 Hence, Gloria’s sense of self as “emotionally stable” may reflect her immersion in a
37
38 world peopled by others from another culture who “get angry” and “grumble”.
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44 According to Williams (2011, 93), “Sports represent a window into the soul of
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46 the culture of its participants”. This quote summarises poetically his work on the
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48 relationship between sports and economics. The foregoing analysis bears this out in
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50 the participant extracts, which provide a snapshot of HK’s culture through the
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52 phenomenology of their lived experience of badminton.
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57 Conclusion

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Despite the growing attention given to the impact of physical activity on healthy ageing in recent years, no qualitative study has examined how badminton, the second most popular participation sport, is experienced by Eastern and Western older adults and the meanings they assign to it. This study explored how experiences of the self, sports, and wellbeing interpermeate in the lifeworlds of active older adults. Participants from the UK and HK experienced badminton as a crucible enabling them to express themselves. Badminton was also a conduit for a range of hopeful emotions for all the participants. Among the British participants, badminton allowed them to articulate becoming a better person, by acting as a mirror and catalyst of their personality. Among the HK participants, badminton provided a connection back to traditional roles, reflected HK's inclusive culture, and symbolised HK's current socio-political situation.

In terms of implications, this study shows how playing a leisure-time sport can facilitate self-improvement and emotion regulation in later life. Researchers and practitioners in the fields of healthy ageing and applied (e.g., clinical, health, sports and exercise, etc.) psychology may beneficially investigate how to maximise such valuable therapeutic effects. Cultural factors which contribute to sports experience may be of interest to club organisers. In particular, since the presence of a coach seems to be valued by people in HK, they can consider sponsoring the coaching fee and offering more accredited coaching courses in HK. In addition, badminton may also be considered part of team-building in organisations to increase morale since it is accommodating of different ages, and it may promote good mood and social interaction.

A limitation and strength of the study is the small number of participants analysed. The method of IPA is idiographic rather than nomothetic, in aiming to

illuminate essentials of phenomena by disclosing actual lived experiences in a particular participant sample. Our themes, therefore, make no claim to generalisability to other people or cultures. Rather, their validity is to be judged on the plausibility of the analyses presented, and whether and to what extent these illuminate for the reader significant and universal features of human experience. IPA is also distinctive in its attention to researcher reflexivity. The first author is bicultural with significant lived experience of HK and the UK, and is bilingual in Cantonese and English. An example of how this impacted the study was the researcher's ability to code-switch in response to the HK participants, thus enabling nuances to be expressed in the interviews. In turn, this enabled different preferred interaction styles among the British and HK participants. For example, some British participants preferred to create their own *modus operandi* in the interviews, whereas some Hong Kong participants preferred to follow the researcher's lead and a clear working framework. This embodied awareness of variations in Eastern and Western cultural values and styles afforded flexibility, nuance and spontaneity in practice, and in the knowledge co-creation process.

Recent findings suggest that numerous HK residents could potentially seek the right to emigrate to the UK, amid mounting concerns regarding Chinese control (Barnett 2015; Price and Pomfret 2017). A common theme from all participants was self expression. Recent political events in HK may be understood as supporting this theme. For example, the Umbrella Movement (Hall 2017) testifies to the high value placed on self-determination and expression by Hongkongers, in common with their UK counterparts and with other democratic nations of the West. Our qualitative findings highlight how experiences of sports participation may serve as a microcosm for elements of the lifeworld more generally. The phenomenological analysis of lived

experiences provides a powerful lens for understanding psychological processes in the individual, and perhaps society more generally.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

See Tables 2 and 3.

[Insert Table 2]

[Insert Table 3]

Table 1. Demographic data for participants

Participant* (Nationality/ Ethnicity)	Sex	Age	Working Status		Frequency of Playing Badminton	Other Regular Exercise
			(Occupation/ Previous Occupation)	Marital Status		
David (UK/ White British)	Male	75	Retired (Government Official)	Widower	Once a Week	Walking
Emma (UK/White British)	Female	63	Full-time (Administrative Officer)	Married	Once a Week	Walking and Yoga
Paul (UK/White British)	Male	60	Part-time (Computer Programmer)	Married	Once a Week	Hillwalking, Stair Climbing, and Swimming
Chris (HK/Chinese)	Male	62	Retired (Insurance Consultant)	Married	Once a Week	Swimming
Gloria (HK/Chinese)	Female	56	Full-time (Piano Teacher)	Married	2 to 3 Times a Week	Dancing and Yoga
Darren (HK/Chinese)	Male	63	Full-time (Architect)	Married	4 Times a Week	Diving

*All participants were given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 2. Inter-case themes for the British group

	David	Emma	Paul
Badminton as a platform for expressing myself	It allows my competitiveness	It brings out my bossiness and dependability	It shows my laid-back side
Badminton as a conduit for self-improvement	The game reflects how I try to cope	It makes me motivated and committed	It develops the desirable personality: extraversion
Badminton keeps me well	It keeps me healthy and gives me pleasure	It helps me shake off the stress	It leads to excitement and reduces stress

Table 3. Inter-case themes for the Hong Kong group

	Darren	Chris	Gloria
Openness enacted in the sporting context	I use different ways to approach the game	It's not just a sport, it's also an artistic activity to appreciate	I like to play with/against someone new
Badminton helps quality of life	Badminton enables better work-life balance; makes me happy	It gives me a sense of purpose	It keeps me young, happy, and hopeful
Badminton is a cultural symbol	Having a good coach is significant	Badminton symbolises the accommodating culture in HK	Ambivalence towards mainlanders